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## The case for obsolescence: thinking time and space in Joaquim Jordà's *Numax*

*presenta* (1980)\*

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In the last scene of Joaquim Jordà's 1980 film, *Numax presenta*, a documentary reflecting on the experience of self-management carried out between 1977 and 1979 by workers of Numax<sup>†</sup>, a now-closed factory for the production of domestic appliances located in the Eixample, the district of Barcelona most associated with the middle-classes, the protagonists throw a party to celebrate the end of their two-year experiment of life inside the factory.<sup>‡</sup> As the group dance and drink within the space they have for so long inhabited for work and political struggle, surrounded by an atmosphere of joy and comradeship, Jordà goes around asking people what their plans for the future are. What transpires from this survey is a collective antagonism towards work, alongside the desire to escape subjection to Capital in the pursuit of personal fulfilment. During a significant part of the scene, Julio César Sanders and César Felipe Vedani's classic tango song, *Adiós muchachos* (Goodbye companions) is performed live in the background by a local band made up of Numax's workers. The lyrics of the song deal with the unwilling resignation of a man in the face of the arbitrary and cruel decisions of an almighty God whose laws have to be obeyed, even when they amount to depriving one of love,

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\* I want to thank Helena Buffery for her help editing this article and with comments to earlier versions of it.

<sup>†</sup> To avoid confusion throughout the article I will be speaking of *Numax presenta* when referring to Jordà's film and of Numax when alluding to the factory and the historical labour dispute.

<sup>‡</sup> The film was made at the request of the workers who, at the end of their two-year Numax experience, and after having collectively decided to give up their enterprise, separate as a group, and move on with their lives, approached the director Joaquim Jordà with the idea of performing their experience in front of the camera, of playing themselves as the protagonists of the narrative they were about to conclude. The documentary was financed by the last money the factory had managed to make, and cost 600,000 pesetas, of the time. The title of the film seeks to convey the workers' ownership of the film.

friendship and ultimately life. Regardless of this negative and disempowered view of life, the I in the song looks back with nostalgia to an existence that is about to conclude, as he says good bye to his companions and to it all. In the context of the optimistic conclusion to the *Numax presenta* documentary, these lyrics are subverted and become ironic, formally through the upbeat, amateur performance of the local band, and contentwise, in the middle of what is a celebration, rather than a farewell. The Numax collective, analogously to the I singing *Adiós muchachos*, has lived under the tyranny of the “almighty God” of Capital but, unlike the I singing *Adiós muchachos*, this group of people could not be happier about the collective decision that decrees their death as factory workers. There is, therefore, no nostalgic looking back in the Numax workers, but a doggedly critical looking back in anger, one that cannot wait to move on to what the protagonists believe will be a less exploitative form of life:

Yo desde luego entrar en una fábrica ni hablar. Pienso organizarme de una manera para poder vivir, y si es posible en el campo, cambiar un poco de vida porque esto de estar en la fábrica en cadena te anula completamente. No quiero que los niños suban en la explotación en que yo he subido. Quiero que se desarrollen más libremente. ¡Vivir en la ciudad es un rollo!

[As far as I am concerned, I am never setting foot in a factory again. I want to organize myself in such a way that I can live, if possible, in the countryside, I want to change my life a bit. This business of being in the factory, in the line of production, it destroys one completely. I do not want my children to grow up with the level of exploitation that I have had to endure, I want for them to develop more freely. Life in the city is a pain!]<sup>§</sup>

The words could not be clearer about this worker’s hostility towards the space of the factory and, by extension, that of the whole city. It is precisely this relation with space that will concern me in this article. I want to argue that, while *Numax presenta* closes

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<sup>§</sup> All quotes from the film are translated by this author.

with its protagonists' unanimous and unmistakable rejection of their workplace, a closer look both at the historical conditions of production of the space of the abandoned Numax factory that the workers go on to occupy, and at the way in which the film dwells on and characterizes the time that the protagonists will spend living in the abandoned building, generates a very productive and positive interpretation of its meaning. Life and work inside what for its owners is an obsolete space, make possible the transformation of the workers as political subjects, and will in the end trigger their empowerment towards a radical contestation against Capital. So rather than being the abhorrent locus of exploitation that one could be forgiven for imagining while reading the worker's words above, the Numax experience in fact has a utopian quality to it.

In what follows, I focus precisely on this concept of obsolescence as an axis of time and space that encapsulates a radical politics. Through a definition of this concept I will theorize the political treatment of time and space in *Numax presenta*, and also in the specific labour dispute taking place in the late 1970s in Barcelona that gave rise to its ulterior representation in the documentary. I start with a theoretical account of the paradigm of obsolescence and its relation to the main paradigm for the study of the politics of time in the city, that of memory studies, to then move to my case study. My aim is to show the usefulness of obsolescence for the study of time and space as it materializes in social relations and conflicts taking place the city, and also for the analysis of cultural products representing and intervening in these processes.

### **Theorizing obsolescence as political time and space**

The majority of studies within the humanities concerned with the politics of time past as incarnated in space and built environments have concentrated overwhelmingly on issues of history and historical memory, more often than not framed by the nation. Interdisciplinary approaches within the humanities (including cultural history, memory studies, urban studies, literature, film and visual studies, cultural anthropology and what is broadly known as cultural studies), have frequently focused their attention on the constructedness of collective ideas about the national past, on the processes by which these are institutionalised and monumentalised, and on their contestation through the proposal of alternative memories invested in commemorative spaces, what Pierre Nora (1997) famously coined as “lieux de memoire.”\*\* I propose here to shift the focus from the temporal axis of historical memory and the spatial axis of the nation, and to direct it, instead, to a definition and exploration of a different regime for the study of the politics of temporality in its intersection with and impact on space, that of obsolescence. In so doing, I am seeking a new theoretical approach to the critical analysis of contemporary urban transformation, that is, to the articulations of time and space in the city.

Studies of the politics of history and collective memory are of great value to assess the complexities of temporality and its importance for a critical understanding of how political collectives are formed and how their experience of time and space is constituted. It is not my intention to diminish or dispute this. My position, instead, is that the political articulations of time (particularly time past) and space in the city, while certainly

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\*\* In the Spanish context, this kind of work has been developed in the works of Aguilar Fernández (1996), Balibrea (2007), Culleton (2005), Delgado (2005, 2007), Epps (2001), Resina (2005) Sánchez (2002), Winter (2005) and Zulaika (2005).

including these issues of memory and history, are not limited to them. Struggles over collective memory invested in a particular space are based on present interpretations of the past that compete with each other, often under unequal conditions, and where space is treated as a trace, in the sense that Paul Ricoeur (2000) and Jacques Derrida (1995) give to it, that is, a marker of an absent past. On the other hand, struggles over the adjudication of obsolescence to a place are based on disputes over the presentness of the building. The core of these disputes, what is to be resisted at all costs is the pastness of the space. Struggles over obsolescence are not primarily based on the defence of the meaning of the past as incarnated in the building and on the relevance of this past for the present. The right to a building is defended on the basis of it having a relevant function, of being a mediator of social conditions in the present, a part of the social agency of the city, that is, a participant now in the lived experience of the city that contributes to the collective making of the city's future form. Spaces of obsolescence are therefore primarily defended on the basis of their full physical and social presence and function in the urban fabric, not on their symbolic value as traces of an irretrievable past. While disputes over obsolescence certainly can take the form of a claim regarding the present value of the building as a trace of a past that needs to be preserved, in practice many of these oppositional processes articulate themselves around issues other than memory concerns, and consequently, they cannot be contained nor can they be fully explained through the analysis of the politics of temporality that memory studies offer. Nevertheless, and this is the crux my argument about obsolescence, they are centrally involved in disputes over temporality in the urban space as I will now go on to show in what remains of this essay through the analysis of the Numax case.

### **The radical context of *Numax presenta***

*Numax presenta* is one of the most representative films of the militant cinema produced in Barcelona from the late 1960s and through the 1970s, which developed initially as a reaction to the last years of Francoism and was very active during the first phase of the Spanish Transition to democracy (García-Merás 2007). As such, it is both a marginal, but also a kind of a cult film, as I will discuss below. Its director, Joaquim Jordà, who died in 2006, was an independent and well respected film-maker whose work, with the exception of his early films of the 1960s, as representative of the avant-gardist *Escuela de Barcelona*, is hardly assimilable to any film school in the Spain of his time. During the years when militant cinema was active, Barcelona was a nodal point of social and political unrest for the Spanish working classes. Factory strikes demanding better working conditions came together with political demonstrations seeking the end of the dictatorship and a viable path to democracy; forms of traditional political militancy established alliances with counter-cultural and grassroots movements where the line between political and social claims was continually crossed and blurred. It is within this context, and to document the events of these crucial years for the Spanish working classes, that radical militant cinema would flourish, sometimes from within the political – communist or anarcho-syndicalist – movements and parties themselves, others independently, seeking to produce new forms of politically-committed audiovisual art



from within the very struggles they were representing.<sup>††</sup> This period closed with the disarticulation and dispersion both of the working-class movement, and of the corresponding militant cinema, as Spain moved firmly to constitute a liberal democratic state embarking, in the aftermath of the 1973 global crisis, on the structural transformation of the country's economy that would announce the post-industrial, postmodern moment, in Spain and elsewhere.

*Numax presenta*, released in 1980 and produced between 1977-1979, is a late example of this militant cinema, a film produced as the historical, cultural, economic and ideological conditions that had made this kind of artistic practice possible were coming to a close. Jordà turned this liminal location historically into a vantage point, allowing the time of the film's narrative to document the central transition that the period had involved for the working class movement, above all its autonomous branch: from participation in traditional working class struggles for the improvement of working conditions, to the rejection of factory work and its ethics on the verge of the movement's disintegration. In addition, the very form of this documentary is a testimony to the end of a way of depicting the working class and its struggles. As a militant film, *Numax presenta* departs crucially from the more pervasive audiovisual strategies used by this kind of militant art aiming at creating for the viewer a direct, transparent, un-mediated representation of the workers' struggles. Jordà implicitly questions this approach by basing the whole documentary in the protagonism of a working class that speaks and acts politically by

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<sup>††</sup> Important names of artists and collectives producing militant audiovisual art in Barcelona at the time are those of Mariano Lisa, Paco Ríos, Isabel Hugué, Llorenç Soler as well as Central del Curt, Colectivo de Cine de Clase and Video Nou.

way of consciously performing for the camera in the role of itself in the process of being transformed into something different. The cinematic experience that the film proposes is therefore very complex, to the extent that it challenges the viewer to consider other audiovisual means to produce the political and the subversive. These other means, rather than negating the presence of the cinematic and performative apparatuses in the pursuit of a radical political content that is located exclusively in the reality being filmed, embraces the medium of the documentary and its politics of representation. What we see the workers doing in *Numax presenta* is take control of their portrayal on screen. In so doing, they make their audiovisual representation, and not only the content of what is being represented, a political act. The Numax workers own the film not only because they finance it, but also because they are the agents of their own representation: by re-enacting their own struggle they are interpreting and deciphering their political acts for the viewer, rather than allowing others – the filmmaker, the party, the audience – the exclusive privilege to interpret these acts for them. As the film proceeds, it becomes apparent that the strategy of giving political agency to workers through the medium of the cinematic apparatus is coherently replicated and amplified throughout the documentary in the content of the political reflections and discussions that the workers/actors will express.

Felipe Pasajes (2008), in his account of autonomous working class groups in late-Francoist Barcelona, explains that they were characterized by the desire to be independent from other leftist trade-unions and parties, and move away from a division between intellectuals and the base in their movement towards the production of a theory of working class struggle that came from the workers themselves. This same kind of

move away from the more institutionalized Left, for reasons connected to the role of the Spanish Communist Party [PCE] and the Spanish Socialist Workers Party [PSOE] and their respective trade-unions – Comisiones Obreras [CCOO] and Unión General de Trabajadores [UGT] – in neutralizing and boycotting working class unrest during the Transition, is very visible in *Numax presenta*. The film shows that the workers' decision to take over the factory is made against the advice of the mainstream unions. But even while indicating through their decision their autonomous and more radical position (compared to that of the mainstream trade unions), the Numax workers choose a form of strike with occupation of the working place whose aim (to protect jobs) is reformist rather than radical in relation to capitalism.<sup>‡‡</sup> The qualitative transformation and radicalization of these workers who initially wished to preserve their jobs happens later, during their experience of self-management, as they come to reject work and its ethics:

Me pienso ir a Sevilla, yo soy de Andalucía. Pienso aprovechar el carnet de paro para estudiar Magisterio. Lo que tengo muy claro y he sacado de esta experiencia es que tengo que pasar mucha hambre para dejar que me exploten de la forma en que me han explotado hasta ahora. Quiero hacer un trabajo que me guste y donde esté bien. Pero trabajar y explotarme otra vez, ni hablar, tengo que pasar mucha hambre para hacerlo.

[Well, what I am planning on doing is going to Sevilla, I am from Andalucía and I plan to take advantage of my unemployment benefits to study to become a Primary school teacher. What is very clear to me and I have got out of this experience is that I will have to starve before letting others exploit me the way I have been exploited until now. I want to do a job that I like and is alright. But to work again and exploit myself, no way, I would have to starve before I'd go through that again.]

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<sup>‡‡</sup>This form of strike with occupation of the working place had been very much in use in France and Italy from the 1960s. There are other examples of it in the Spain of the 1970s (see García Perrote-Escartín [2008], Mesa Encina [2008] and Espai en Blanc [2008]). There is an increasing prominence of use of this form of strike in Argentina since the early 2000s.

The views expressed by this Numax worker articulate forms of rebellion and dissidence that are representative of a generation of counter-cultural struggles. Contestations against the capitalist exploitation of the worker generally referred in countercultural movements to wage and the workplace, but focused particularly on the disciplinary mechanisms and alienation involved in assembly line production, to which they responded with forms of indiscipline such as absenteeism and sabotage that stemmed from the rejection of all forms of work under capitalist conditions of exploitation. More generally, countercultural movements' response to the capitalist subjection of the workers's life as a whole would be the attempt to liberate everyday life from the grip of Capital. As Carmona Pascual puts it: "Se trataba de apuntar hacia modos de vida que arruinasen los mecanismos de mando articulados en la fábrica" [The point was to aim for ways of life that ruined the mechanisms of control articulated in the factory] (2008, 214).

This desire to destroy the mechanisms of control articulated in the factory begins to explain the reaction of Jordà's interviewees to his question at the end of *Numax presenta* about their future, that is, their happiness that the whole experience is over. For the film, these kinds of responses are the culmination of the process of transformation of political subjectivities that *Numax presenta* aimed to document and celebrate. In the collective experience of self-management, the workers involved are shown to have recovered their lives, elevating them above the demands of mere survival that characterized their struggle in its first phase. While participating in the collective process of working autonomously in the factory, they realize that the change to work for themselves, but under unchanged and unavoidable capitalist conditions of exploitation, far from producing dignity and self-

fulfilment, is not only equally exploitative and alienating, but more so as one becomes his or her own exploiter (this is identified in the film as double exploitation). Work in the factory, the viewers are invited to conclude, has no redeemable meaning. In other words, the transformational experience that the Numax workers perform for the camera and by which the audience watches them act as political subjects, is not towards the acquisition of a classical class consciousness (though, of course, the taking over of the factory could not have happened without their class consciousness and without an infrastructure of class organization). What is new, rather, is the consciousness allowing them to understand and develop an articulated critique of how work under capitalist conditions exercises a lethal control over life as a whole. In other words, their rejection of what Foucault calls biopolitics, that is to say, a mode of governing populations, characteristic of neo-liberalism, defined by the use of indirect techniques for the leading and controlling of individuals, also referred to as technologies of self, that permeates all aspects of life, intertwining power and life inextricably. It is from the realization of this subjectification that insubordination and resistance can emerge. The literal exodus from the factory at the end of the film, forced by the acknowledgement of the economic non-viability of the business but also embraced by the workers as a liberating experience, entails the abandonment of the place of work but also of the factory as the privileged space of class struggle (Virno, 2001). And this is to be understood, as Jordà never ceases to insist, not as a defeat of the Numax workers succumbing in the face of market forces, but as their victory over Capital.

This whole optimistic view of the transformation of class consciousness in times of capitalist restructuring goes a long way to explain why the film has enjoyed some sort of a comeback in the last ten years. Its view of the desirability of the working class' flight from the factory, its resignification of the subjection and management exercised by biopower (that is, its resignification of biopolitics) as a springboard for resistance and subversion on the part of the workers, has direct links with Antonio Negri's political and philosophical ideas on the working class, and with the Italian political groups that he led or actively participated in during the 1970s of *operaismo* (workerism) and *Autonomia Operaia* (Worker's Autonomy), and with which Jordà became familiar during his years in Italy.<sup>§§</sup> Indeed, the film has been recovered in the context of the great influence that Negri and Hardt's best-selling political manifesto, *Empire*, has had in recent years amongst certain circles of the Spanish cultural and non-institutional political left. Antonio Negri himself has had nothing but praise for the film.<sup>\*\*\*</sup> He said in 2004, in the context of a series of lectures organized by the art institutions MACBA (Museum of Contemporary Art of Barcelona) and Arteleku (in San Sebastián), where he appeared along with Jordà, that Numax was prophetic and endowed with an extraordinary clarity, commending

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<sup>§§</sup>Jordà had lived in Italy in the early 1970s and was connected to the PCI (Italian Communist Party), that commissioned him to do a commemorative film for the centenary of Vladimir Lenin, *Lenin vivo* (1970). It is there that he came into contact with the great working class unrest and social mobilization in northern Italy that generated the autonomous working class movement. He collaborated on a book, along with Paolo Pozzi and Roberta Tommasini entitled: *Del obrero masa al obrero social: entrevista sobre el obrerismo*, published in Spanish by Anagrama in 1980, and published in English as an article entitled "From mass worker to the socialized worker" (note that in the Spanish version Jordà appears only as the translator). For more on Jordà's involvement with the far left and autonomous groups in Italy, see "Resumen de la conferencia de Joaquim Jordà".

<sup>\*\*\*</sup> Indeed, Jordà's film's message perfectly matches Negri's idea, expressed since his *Marx beyond Marx*, that the desire in the working classes to abandon the factory, to find a different form of production and work, appeared at a time of failure, at the time of the workers' expulsion from the big factories that were being dismantled. See also Negri's "The Labor of Multitude and the Fabric of Biopolitics" for an account of biopolitics as insurrection against Capital that matches Numax's workers revolt against their working conditions and their lives as a whole.

Jordà's ability to foresee in the late 1970s the approaching sea changes in working class' struggles ("Resumen de la conferencia de Toni Negri", 2004).<sup>†††</sup>

But however one wishes to interpret the nature of the politicization undergone by Numax's workers, this article aims to argue that their radicalization had in fact been determined by the location of their two-year experience of self-management in the time and space of the obsolete, that is there, in the lapse of obsolescence that the productive process of collective politicization and liberation takes place for the Numax workers. So let us now turn to an exploration of the concept of obsolescence that will allow us to understand better its conditions of production in Barcelona's Numax factory, as well as elucidating its explanatory power to define the politics of time and space in urban contexts.

### **Generating Numax as an obsolete space**

Nutt et al. define housing obsolescence as:

The relative degree of uselessness or disutility as assessed by the occupants themselves, or by the landlord, the property market or the planner, as the case may be. The perception of obsolescence will vary in scale from the individual's view of his own housing conditions to the local community's awareness of poor housing areas, to the national viewpoint,

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<sup>†††</sup> Partly explainable by this context too, in the last ten years the question of militant film from the 1960s and 1970s has interested producers and curators (*Espai en Blanc*, Marcelo Expósito, Jorge Luis Marzo), as well as artistic and museistic Spanish institutions. The Center for Contemporary Art of Barcelona (CCCB) has produced the exhibition *En Transición* [In transition] (2008); the Museum of Contemporary Art of Barcelona (MACBA), in collaboration with UNIA [International University of Andalucía] Sevilla and Arteleku in San Sebastián hosted the exhibition *Desacuerdos* (2004). More recently the two latter ones have organized *Luchas autónomas en el estado español, 1970-1977* [Autonomous Struggles in the Spanish State, 1970-1977] (2009). All of them include the exhibition of and reflection around militant audiovisual productions, including those of Jordà.

i.e. to a socio-political view of general housing standards and conditions (1976, 53).

There are two sets of questions that need to be underlined here. The first has to do with the politics of temporality implied in obsolescence which is only implicitly referred to in the quote through the use of the abstract nouns “uselessness” or “disutility”. Both words imply a perception of any given built environment as exclusively constituted by a valueless past. To the extent that the obsolete space is deemed worthless and burdensome, it has no ability to function in the present. Obsolescence is always a negative assessment of the accumulated time contained in a building and implies a destructive activation of its temporality. This assessment is fundamental to justify the decision to destroy or otherwise abandon any given space. Recognition of this takes us to the second question, one made explicit in the above quote: obsolescence is the result of informed perception, of interpretation of the built environment. Fred Scott, in his recent *On altering architecture* goes as far as to say that “[i]t is difficult not to associate it [obsolescence] with censorship, or at least with a license to censor.” (2008, 5), and much earlier in 1969 Medhurst and Lewis had also viewed obsolescence as “a function of human perception and decision” (quoted from Nutt et al. 1976, 23). In short, obsolescence is often externally adjudicated by someone with the power to do so, rather than stemming from intrinsic objective structural qualities and conditions of the particular building under threat. Nutt, et. al. recognize that “functional obsolescence generally precedes structural obsolescence and [...] much building stock is currently demolished long before it reaches a state of irreversible decay” (1976, 23). Obsolescence is therefore connected to the defined function of the building and to what Scott calls the “rituals of



occupation” (2008, 5) that derive from its main uses. Obsolescence tends to appear whenever there are alterations in the patterns of a building’s uses and rituals of occupation, when those alterations are interpreted as having left it functionless and without a purpose by those with power over the building. If we agree that the city is the paramount locus of dynamic spatial change, it follows that obsolescence will be intrinsically embedded in cycles of urban change and regeneration. Moreover, obsolescence is a historical as well as an ideological discourse endowed with the power to adjudicate meaning to the function and the legitimacy of rituals of occupation in relation to a particular built environment. It is as such, as a historical and ideological discourse, that it will be contested and resisted in the urban space. All this is fully articulated in the documentary *Numax presenta* and in the historical events that inspired it, which I will now explore.

*Numax presenta*’s case study of class struggle can be connected to the major political and socio-economic restructuring that was beginning to take place at the time of the film’s production in Barcelona, in Spain and across Europe: namely, the process towards de- and post-industrialization, the abandonment of fordist-keynesian modes of production in factories and the advent of postfordism, postmodernism and globalization. The 1970s marked for Barcelona the almost surreptitious start of a thorough restructuring of the city, when the effects of the global crisis of 1973 were beginning to be felt. It would not be until the mid 1980s that the impact of recession would sweep the city: over 20% unemployment, the return of the immigrant communities to their areas of origin in other parts of Spain, hoards of small and middle-sized companies closing down or selling up,

and a steep drop in urban land prices. Under these circumstances, as the demand for industrial property plummeted, there began to unfold a textbook example of the processes of gentrification and urban regeneration. In the words of economists Miren Etxezarreta, et. al. (1997, pp. 240-241):

The private sector promoted and provided the impetus for ambitious reconstruction projects that enabled them to revalue and speculate with property that was no longer sought after for industrial use. The transformation of industrial space into shopping areas, office space and certain kinds of housing was particularly spectacular: examples of a sweeping change that turned former industrial property into urban developments.

While this transformation was not yet at its height in the Barcelona of *Numax presenta*, its first symptoms could already be detected. The Numax business was one of many threatened fordist factories in the city. In 1976 its owners closed down an otherwise profit-making business<sup>\*\*\*</sup> and decided that, instead of continuing production, it was more advantageous to take business elsewhere and demolish the factory. Or, according to the interpretation favoured by *Numax presenta*, they wanted to terminate their manufacturing business in order to be able to speculate with the urban prime space it occupied, using their political influence to have the industrial site converted into lucrative residential space, which is what it is today. After a period of unsuccessful strikes to force the owners to re-open the factory, and faced with the inevitable refusal of the owners to do so, Numax became an obsolete space for an obsolete business, waiting for the right conditions to morph into the repository of a more adequate, (i.e. lucrative) function for

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<sup>\*\*\*</sup> *Numax presenta* is careful to make this point visually, as the imminence of the factory closing down and the building being demolished is countered by evidence of the fitness and functionality of the building and the business. The beginning of the documentary offers a number of slow, long general takes of empty rooms with shiny machinery apparently in perfect working order but devoid of workers, as well as re-enactments of the employees working in the production line.

Capital. It was when confronted with this newly-defined situation, and in order to interrupt the fluidity and smoothness of this transition within capitalist time, that the workers decided and were able collectively to take control both of the factory space and of production in all of its facets. The events recreated in *Numax presenta*, therefore, take place within the space, but also within the time of the obsolete, to the extent that they happen in an in-between of transition, in the time of the not anymore (of functioning factory) and of the not yet (of the demolished factory being substituted by a housing complex), a time literally created by the workers with their occupation. This interval, this lapse of obsolescence, and the necessary idleness that characterizes it in the social space's transit from one use to another of the urban fabric for capitalist regeneration, proves to be a productive one, not only for Capital, but, paradoxically, for the workers too. It will be during that planned and provoked interval of obsolescence, when capitalist interests struggled to silence workers' resistances, that the most radical response from the workers would take place. The period of two years that they spent in the occupied obsolete space, learning first to manage the business, and later to disengage themselves from it, became a transformational time during which they came to constitute themselves as new political subjects.

The productive character of the space and time of obsolescence is clearly constructed in *Numax presenta* at a cinematic level. As the workers recount their experience of self-management, the factory becomes a stage on which the protagonists reenact events of the past, or reflect upon the transformative, conflictive period they are about to end. The space of the factory, occupied once its obsolescence has been decreed, will become a

different kind of place where the workers will recover their self-esteem and turn into an autonomous – rather than a subjected – collective, one capable of thinking, collaborating and disagreeing without the permission of any boss or trade union. The film takes place for the most part inside the factory, its transformed role in the lived experiences of the workers represented in its ceasing to be a workspace and becoming, instead, a newly-constructed, practised and inscribed space where the workers engage in place-making activities such as discussing their situation and what has brought them where they are, educating themselves, waiting, reading, chatting and playing chess or cards. In other words, the place is transformed into a lived space in the sense defined by Henri Lefebvre in *The production of space*, that is, endowed with qualities and experiences that are not necessarily fully defined by the commodification and abstraction of spatial practices enforced by capitalism in the city (in this case those connected to work and production), but rather a communal and shared space that allows its inhabitants to imagine different social relations. The camera stays focused on its characters, with slow panning movements that are consistently centred on them and never distracted by non human elements. It is only at the beginning of the film that we are given a different perspective. When the start of the conflict is recounted, we see the workers in the assembly line, plotting against the manager to organize a clandestine gathering during a break. The camera travels through the lines of workers, their intelligent concentration focused on mechanical, repetitive work that puts them in relation with a machine, rather than with each other, and by so doing dehumanizes them, stressing their wasted potential. This classic, metonymical image of human-machine interaction standing for modern times, is a residual, critical one in *Numax presenta*. While we know that the workers, in the

process of self-managing the factory, did continue to produce, there are not to be any more direct, visual representations of production. Instead, what the film is focused on generating is the consciousness of the worker once capitalist production has ceased to be viable, that is, the consciousness born out of idle time and in the lived space of obsolescence.

Equally, it is only at an early point in the film, when the first phases of the struggle are being re-enacted, that we have examples of an antagonistic representation of the dichotomy between inside/outside, and of verticality (up/down). In one such case, mimicking the eye of the capitalist bosses, the camera locates itself inside a capitalist space of oppression, one of the managerial offices on the first floor, by the window, looking out and down at the workers who are protesting and chanting slogans in an adjacent lot. Suddenly, the camera moves back, as if in fear, and a stone, presumably being thrown by the protesters, breaks the window pane and defiantly penetrates the space of power. From this point on, power differences and class antagonism will not be marked spatially within the film's representation of the factory, and we will see workers occupying both executive offices and production bays, according to their own new rituals of occupation (Scott, 2008, 5). During this long part of the film, the camera favours horizontality over verticality and the exterior and interior of the factory are indistinctly inhabited for the retelling of practices associated with place-making and the awakening of a new radical consciousness.

Time is used by the film to maximize the representation of agency and empowerment on the part of the workers. We know from the beginning that the time of the self-managing experience is closed, or closing, and from there the documentary works in a flash-back to recuperate key moments in the chronological narrative of that two-year transformational experience. Only those moments containing political meaning are chosen. To the extent that the workers act as themselves in that past, the documentary blurs the boundaries of the genre, consciously introducing theatrical techniques as tools to reflect upon the past. This re-enacted time past is then used as the raw material by workers to reflect on their experience, so that the film is continuously moving between these two poles: from the representation of the past to reflection upon it. Workers articulate their ideas and differences (most of the time) clearly, rationally and in a contained and civilized manner, never yelling or using violence against each other, thus appearing consistently as an impressive, proud working class collective. Underlined in this way is the privileged status that participation in the experience brings. *Numax presenta* represents the two years spent in the space of the “made-obsolete” factory as a heterotopia in the Foucauldian sense, an “other” space where the workers have been able to escape the violence that is inherent and inescapable in class relations, sufficiently isolating themselves from the dynamics and interpellations of the outside world in order to focus on generating a new political consciousness. It is in this positive sense that the protagonists go on to speak of their Numax experience as their university (Garcés, 2006), as it can be understood as a pedagogically radical approach to learning how to become a critical subject. Whilst in all these senses, *Numax presenta* can be said to be constructing for its audience a utopian experiment, the film is far from being a pamphlet, and the certainty of dispersion at the

end of it, together with the obsolescence by which the workers are surrounded, prevents a simplistic or triumphalist reading of the film.

## **Conclusion**

Discourses on obsolescence articulate a coherent politics and economy of time which is indispensable for the success of urban regeneration projects. What is at stake in struggles over and contestations of this discourse is the need to prove that a given, so-called obsolete space has meaning and is viable, or, put another way, that it does not belong to the terminal time of obsolescence. Therefore, struggles over obsolescence are disputes over the meaning of time in space, to the extent that they contest the politics of time involved in obsolescence. In turn, efforts to prove obsolescence wrong by occupying or otherwise using the space in whatever way those implicated in the contestation see fit are not only political interventions in space, but in time as well, as is clear in the Numax workers transformation of the useless time of the abandoned factory into the productive time of politicization. The liminal, extreme position that the obsolete space occupies at the decreed end of its time is not, as the film makes clear, an inconsequential point in a fatally irrevocable time: it is rather a lapse, an interval intrinsic to obsolescence where the opportunity arises to reverse, or at least to appeal, the death sentence hanging over the obsolete space. Put differently, as the obsolete space is left alone to languish, a temporary disengagement of market forces necessarily occurs, and with it, a moment of vulnerability affecting the pursuit of capitalist interests. This is precisely the weak spot, the window of opportunity (sometimes ephemeral, others more permanent) that is taken

seized by resistant practices to occupy the abandoned space and to resignify it through a different use, or through the maintenance of the same uses in order to prove that these are still viable and valuable. In the process, the politics implied in discourses of obsolescence are questioned and rendered visible. Moreover, for as long as this time of contestation lasts, as the analysis of *Numax presenta* proves, the occupiers of the space arguably have access to a quality of time that allows for reflection and transformation to occur.



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